

A Supervisor's Guide to Employee Assistance



King County

Employee Assistance Program

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A Special Message to Supervisors*

Managing employees who have personal problems or personal issues affecting their work performance may be one of the greatest challenges you will face in your management career. Why not get all the help and support available? The confidential counseling and referral services of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services are available to all county employees, and they're also available to you.

When you call the EAP:

- You take an effective, proactive management approach to problem-solving
- Your call and all conversations concerning the problem are kept in strict confidence
- You receive guidance and support to prepare you for follow-up discussion with your employee
- You make the decisions and are not committed to taking any actions you do not wish to take
- When you come to the EAP office, you have a private place to discuss the matter.

Supervisors have three basic responsibilities in relation to the EAP. They are to:

- Understand the EAP purpose, function, and policies
- Consult with the EAP and refer troubled employees** when appropriate and
- Make all subordinate personnel aware of the EAP and services it can provide.

The purpose of this guide is to help you with the first two of these responsibilities. In addition to this guide, Employee Assistance staff members provide regular training for supervisors and are available for immediate consultation.

The third responsibility -- to make subordinate personnel aware of the EAP and services it can provide -- is best accomplished by providing all of your employees with an EAP brochure. Group presentations can also be helpful. For brochures or to arrange a presentation, contact an EAP staff member.

* "Supervisor," a term generally used in reference to first-line management, refers to all levels of management levels for the purpose of this guide.

** "Troubled employee" is any whose personal problem is affecting job-performance.

What is the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

Frequently, employee performance problems are the result of unresolved personal problems. As a supervisor or manager, you are responsible for identifying performance problems, informing employees about those observations and assisting employees in correcting those problems. Personal issues are generally not within management's legitimate purview of discussion. That apparent dilemma may be resolved by using the EAP. (Page 4 of this guide identifies a number of performance and behavior problems that are often the result of personal problems that you can and should discuss with employees.)

The EAP serves as a resource for confidential management consultation and guidance. It also serves as a resource for the troubled employee to discuss the performance issues and, with the assurance of confidentiality and training to deal with such matters, the personal issues that may be contributing to the problem. The EAP works with the employee to find resources, when indicated, to assist with the personal problems.

Many employees who utilize the EAP are self-referrals. This guide pertains to management referrals. In either case, an assessment interview takes place. Depending on the outcome of the assessment, the employee may receive information, brief counseling, a referral, some follow-up assistance or all of these services.

There is never a wrong reason for an employee to call the EAP. Most problems employees bring to the EAP are those personal issues that are difficult to discuss with anyone. These employees have been convinced that the assurances of confidentiality are credible. We recommend employees utilize the Making Life Easier Program** when their concerns are strictly personal -- the loss of a loved one, mental health issues or concerns about their children, for example.

We suggest employees call the Employee Assistance Program when the personal concern is linked to the job, particularly when county policy may be relevant. In all cases of supervisor consultation regarding a troubled employee, we recommend calling the Employee Assistance Program rather than Making Life Easier.

* "Job-performance" refers to actual performance, behavior on the job or attendance.

** Making Life Easier is a counseling and referral service available to all benefit-eligible employees. If you are not familiar with this service, please ask the EAP for information and a brochure.

When do you refer an employee to EAP?

You may become aware that an employee is having personal problems as the result of direct acknowledgment by the employee. This frequently happens when you discuss job performance concerns with an employee. When those situations occur, it is most appropriate to inform the employee of the EAP. It is advisable to minimize discussion about the personal issues. All too often, problems that are being acknowledged are not the primary cause for performance deficiencies.

There may be occasions when an employee acknowledges personal problems and it is not in the context of a corrective action discussion. It may, in fact, be an employee to whom you have consistently given high marks for performance and would not suspect of having difficulties with personal concerns. Their trust in you may have generated a candid revelation about personal issues. This may well be an appropriate time to remind an employee of the EAP or Making Life Easier services.

There will come a time in your career when neither of the above situations exists, but a referral to the EAP is most certainly appropriate. Typically, this is when there are performance problems but no acknowledgment by the employee of personal problems. On these occasions, it is especially important to consult with the EAP prior to the discussion with the employee. This consultation should assist you in a number of ways and enhance the opportunity for a positive outcome.

The list of symptoms on the next page can be a helpful reference in two respects. First, the symptoms listed provide indicators that a referral to the EAP may be appropriate. (The symptoms listed are common to a number of personal problems employees may experience, but should not be seen as diagnostic of any particular type of problem).

Second, the list of symptoms may be used in discussion with the employee, especially if you have adequate documentation of performance and behavior problems. What may appear to be telling an employee that he or she needs counseling is circumvented. Instead you inform the employee as to why you are concerned with the performance or behavior, outline the consequences of continued inadequate performance, and identify the appropriate symptoms from the list. Then you explain that a primary function of the EAP is to assist employees to modify performance or behavior problems on the job.

Signs indicating an EAP referral may be appropriate

Absenteeism

- Number of days missed increases or is excessive
- Unauthorized leave
- Excessive tardiness or frequently leaves job early
- Calling in to inform that s/he will be late, then be much later or not show
- Weekend or holiday patterns of absenteeism
- Unusual, sometimes bizarre excuses for absenteeism or tardiness
- Unexpected disappearances from the work-site or unusually frequent trips to the restroom

Behavioral problems

- Wide swings in mood/attitude
- Overreaction to real or imagined criticism
- Emotional outbursts, irritability, nervousness, crying spells
- Unreasonable resentment or even hostility; blames others excessively
- Avoids others to the degree of affecting work relationships
- Elicits complaints from coworkers
- Talks with coworkers about personal problems
- Any expression of depression, sadness, threats, or self-destructive intentions
- Any behavior that you would consider to be out of the ordinary

Job performance

- Overall productivity deteriorates
- Deadlines missed
- More than average number of complaints from the public, customers, or co-employees
- Poor judgment and decision making
- Inability to recognize own mistakes
- Increased difficulty in understanding instructions/directions
- Very irregular work patterns
- Ongoing excuses for poor performance

Physical signs

- Impairment of speech, mental or physical response
- Red or watery eyes; pinpoint or dilated pupils
- Chronic sinus problems
- Hand tremors
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Disheveled appearance
- Odor of alcohol
- Evidence of accidents on or off the job

Your responses may suggest a need for an EAP consultation

Just as you will observe signs in an employee's performance or behavior that may indicate a referral to the EAP, your own responses may well be indicators for an EAP consultation. Some of the responses to look for in yourself will be in terms of the way you feel and others will be in terms of the way you behave. Some of the more common feelings supervisors experience when dealing with a troubled employees include:

- Anger
- Helplessness
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Fear
- Disappointment.

These feelings often result in the following behaviors:

- Doing nothing, ignoring the problem
- Covering up for the employee, making excuses for them
- Having someone else do the job
- Doing the work yourself
- Cutting off communication with the employee
- Inappropriate statements
- Promoting them
- Counseling them about their personal problems
- Having a martini.

If any of the above looks familiar, consider yourself very “normal.” These are common responses to many of the problems that a troubled employee will present. A **most important** function of the EAP is to help you deal with the difficulties of supervising a troubled employee. So **do** call the EAP for consultation. It has been said, “troubled employees beget troubled supervisors,” and our experience demonstrates the veracity of that statement.

The discussion

Adequate preparation for the discussion with the employee may make the difference in the outcome. You may wish to review the following suggestions that include some ideas for preparation and the discussion itself:

- Be clear about your expectations of acceptable performance or behavior
- Have all pertinent documentation available for reference
- Arrange for location and time that will allow discussion to be uninterrupted and totally confidential
- Depending on the point at which this discussion takes place in the corrective or disciplinary action process, be sure to consult with your management and, if appropriate, allow for the employee to have representation
- Inform the employee that you wish to discuss all your concerns without interruption while assuring that there will be sufficient time to respond to each detail
- If this is not the first time the problem has been discussed, review all previous discussions
- Be specific in terms of behaviors, times, locations, impact on productivity, impact on others productivity
- Attempt to elicit employee's acknowledgment of job problem and desirability to correct deficiency
- Develop a plan for improvement with specific goals in terms of expectations and times for review
- Be clear in your own mind that you are judging the performance or behavior, not the employee; judging performance and behavior is not a right, it is a responsibility
- Follow-up on planned reviews and
- Document this discussion.

Referrals to the EAP

We suggest you consult with the EAP before making a referral.

EAP staff members can review with you the performance, behavior or attendance issues you are asking the employee to modify. It is as important for the EAP to be as clear about those expectations as it will for your employee to be.

The EAP can also review or help you rehearse your discussion with the employee about an EAP referral. It will be important at this time to discuss what may or may not be appropriate to say to the employee. For example, supervisors commonly suggest they perceive a need for counseling. That is clearly inappropriate to say to an employee. Preparation for this discussion may be as important as any part of this process.

Finally, consulting with the EAP before making a referral can clarify your expectations about making the referral.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is crucial to the success of this program. Any doubt about the assurances of confidentiality will be a major obstacle to utilization of these services. Employees should understand that information shared with the EAP will be disclosed to no one without their written consent except where required or permitted by law or county policy. Employees are asked to read the “Employee Assistance Policy on Confidentiality” statement (pages 9-10) before beginning their first session with the EAP counselor. Any questions or concerns they have are addressed at that time or later as needed.

Additional EAP Services

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD). When any form of emotional trauma occurs in the work place, CISD is useful. A critical incident can be any event from which employees experience unusual or extreme emotional reactions that interfere with their ability to function normally. A debriefing is a facilitated discussion with all those individuals involved. The goals are to identify feelings, dispel thoughts of abnormality, and minimize or prevent possible residual problems.

Grief Processing Group Facilitation. Work units are all different and many would prefer no outside assistance when the group is grieving the loss of a coworker or person who has been known by most employees in the unit. Some work units do request assistance, however, and particularly when there has been a sudden or unexpected death such as a vehicle accident or apparent suicide. The EAP can facilitate such groups upon request.

Crisis Intervention. An intervention may be considered when you have a concern about an employee’s emotional health. The EAP recommends a direct call to security, police or 911 in cases of emergency. However, supervisors may begin to get signs from employees or coworkers that lead to concerns for an employee’s potential threat to self or others. The EAP may be able to assist in these cases and recommends you call for a consultation.

As we explained on page 2, there is **never** a wrong reason to consult with the Employee Assistance Program. If we cannot be of assistance, we’ll make every effort to guide you to a resource that can.

KING COUNTY EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Confidentiality Statement of Understanding

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) staff respects the personal and sensitive information you provide and treats all discussions confidentially. Release of any information generally requires the employee's knowledge and consent. However, federal and state laws require some exceptions to total confidentiality as well as county policy guided by concern for public safety. Those exceptions are outlined in the following.

Disclosure Outside the County to Appropriate Agencies

The EAP:

- 1) *Must* report abuse of children, dependent adults or developmentally disabled to appropriate agencies when the EAP has reasonable cause to believe such abuse occurred
- 2) *Must* report threats of grave bodily harm or death to the intended victims and appropriate agencies
- 3) *Must* report threats of suicide to appropriate health or law enforcement agencies to prevent harm to the client
- 4) *Must* respond to lawful subpoenas of court orders unless a protective court order is issued by a competent jurisdiction forbidding compliance
- 5) *May* disclose relevant information to medical personnel in a medical emergency or to qualified personnel for research, audit, or program evaluation
- 6) *May* disclose confidential information when there is reason to believe that crimes have been committed against King County or criminal acts have occurred in the workplace.

Disclosure Within the County to Appropriate Personnel

The EAP may disclose within the county to appropriate personnel when:

- 1) An employee has or has not made or kept an appointment by a referring supervisor
- 2) An employee holds a position determined by King County to be safety-sensitive, any failure to comply with EAP recommendations to obtain assessment and any subsequent treatment recommendations for chemical dependency or medical or behavioral conditions that jeopardize public safety
- 3) It is reasonably necessary for King County to defend against any charges, claims or grievances brought in any forum against the county or any of its agencies or employees
- 4) The EAP has reasonable belief that crimes have been committed against King County or criminal acts have occurred in the workplace
- 5) There is evidence of impairment and the EAP has a reasonable belief that:
 - a) An employee impairment poses significant risk of substantial harm to self or others and
 - b) The impairment affects the employee's ability to safely perform his or her job or affects whether employee is medically able to perform the essential functions of his or her job.

EAP Confidentiality Statement of Understanding (continued)

Employee Assistance Program personnel are not the appropriate persons in King County to whom one should report discriminatory harassment for the purpose of seeking an investigation and corrective action. The EAP is not required to report discriminatory harassment or discrimination. King County has policies prohibiting such behavior in the workplace. If discussions with EAP personnel indicate such behavior has occurred, you will be given the King County Executive's Anti-harassment Policy which contains guidance for reporting such contact. You will be asked to sign a waiver affirming that the EAP has no responsibility to report such behavior. If you refuse to sign the waiver, the EAP may then report the conduct to appropriate personnel. Additionally, the EAP may disclose to appropriate personnel the facts regarding your discussions of potential harassment if reasonably necessary for King County to defend against any claims by you in any forum.

The confidentiality of alcohol and drug information disclosed to the EAP by an employee is protected by federal law and regulations. Generally, the EAP may not say to a person outside the program that a person attends the program, or disclose any information identifying a patient as an alcohol or drug abuser unless:

- 1) The person consents in writing;
- 2) The disclosure is allowed by a court order or
- 3) The disclosure is made to medical personnel in a medical emergency or to personnel for research, audit or program evaluation.

The EAP may disclose to appropriate decision-makers that an employee is not fit for duty in the case of drug or alcohol impairment under the conditions set forth above in Sections 5a and 5b. Violation of the federal law and regulations by a program is a crime. Suspected violations may be reported to appropriate authorities in accordance with federal regulations. Federal law and regulations do not protect any information about a crime committed by a patient either at the program or against any person who works for the program or about any threat to commit such a crime. Federal laws and regulations do not protect any information about suspected child abuse or neglect from being reported under state law to appropriate state or local authorities.

I have read the above and fully understand the confidential provisions and exceptions of services provided by the King County Employee Assistance Program.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of EAP Provider

Date